Modern Chinese Literature and Culture

Literary Innovation and Modes of Production: A Commentary
Author(s): FREDRIC JAMESON
Source: *Modern Chinese Literature*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 1984), pp. 67-77
Published by: Foreign Language Publications
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41490568
Accessed: 25/06/2014 08:28

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Foreign Language Publications and *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Modern Chinese Literature*.

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Literary Innovation and Modes of Production: A Commentary

FREDRIC JAMESON

Two striking, yet very different, contemporary Chinese-language writers claim our attention in this first issue of *Modern Chinese Literature*. Debates around the work of both, including the critical studies published here, inevitably turn around such concepts as experimentation, technical innovation, and stylistic novelty—categories familiar in the critical literature generated by Western modernism, but which may be expected to have a somewhat different resonance in the Chinese-language context. Even if we accept them at face value, however, they all obviously imply a previous situation, an earlier literary production and tradition, which is the context or even the object of modification.

I have felt it useful, therefore, to return to an earlier moment in modern Chinese literature as a way of measuring the extent of the mutations in question, and also of testing the adequacies of some of these (modernist) critical concepts. Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi* (1936) is justly considered to be a classic of modern Chinese realism and may thus serve as a useful point of departure. It will become apparent shortly, however, that this novel is by no means a simple replication of the analogous Western narrative forms, and, beyond that, that the very category of realism itself implies something much more complicated than a simple reflexion or mimesis of reality. I will indeed read Lao She's novel as a superposition of two distinct narrative paradigms, something like an outer and an inner form, in tension with one another in an active process whereby the inner form perpetually works upon and systematically undermines the outer form throughout the novel's progression or production. This conception of realism as a mutual interaction of two narrative paradigms, as a decoding of one by the other, is I think generally valid for Western realisms as well; but takes a specific historical form here by virtue of the way in which one of these paradigms is marked as a Western import.

On the face of it, *Camel Xiangzi* is a novel about money: the great Balzacian obsession; although it is also a novel whose characters begin by being poor and sink even lower into misery (a social material not really developed in the novel until Zola; the biographical filiation with Dickens, an obligatory mention in any study of Lao She, seems less relevant in the case of this particular work). But the type of plot enabled by a specific attitude towards money is what concerns us here.

Everything in the hapless protagonist's life turns on the difficulty of saving money: again and again, Xiangzi laboriously collects enough to buy his own rickshaw (one hundred dollars), and again and again, the goal—won or on the point of being won—slips once more out of his grasp (the newly acquired rickshaw is confiscated by soldiers, then the painfully reamassed sum is extorted by a police spy, thereafter becoming ever more difficult to reacquire, particularly as Xiangzi grows older). What is central here, from the standpoint of social psychology, is Xiangzi's iron will: the drive to save, as Max Weber taught us, is by no means some natural or universal human impulse, but involves a historical reconstruction of the human psyche, a training of the subject in delayed

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

gratification, a painful, historically original new human habit, whose emergence is determined by the requirements of the first stage of the accumulation of capital, but which then survives as a painful fatality for a classical petty bourgeoisie struggling to avoid slipping back down into proletarianization (or for those rare members of the lowest classes struggling painfully to climb the ladder and to achieve petty bourgeois status, as is the case here).

It is therefore psychologically logical that such an "unnatural" effort of the will should need to strengthen itself (and to disguise its purely economic nature) by appeal to extra-economic motivations: in this case, Xiangzi's passion for the object itself—the rickshaw—about which more in a moment. What must be stressed, then, is that the money-form as such is not at all limited to developed capitalism (although it will there undergo the prodigious mutation from commerce to capital functions proper), and that therefore the thematics of money are by no means sufficient to mark a literary work as the formal expression of the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, I have come to feel that one of the classic reference points for traditional Marxist aesthetics (and for Marx and Engels themselves)—the novels of Balzac—in many ways reflect precapitalist attitudes towards money. Xiangzi is at least on the point of investing his savings: the Balzacian miser, however, who hoards his gold, the Balzacian usurer for whom its mere possession is a delight and a passion, are very far from being figures for the accumulation of capital. In the world of hoarding and miserly obsession, the pile of gold, the treasure, remains a sacred object, tangible material wealth of a quasi-ostentatious type (in Balzac associated with archaic attitudes towards sexual energy as well, which have, I believe, their analogies in the Chinese tradition: both can be squandered, but never replenished—an erotic ideology, incidentally, largely developed by Balzac's father in one of his most significant pamphlets).

These residues of pre-capitalist attitudes towards money suggest that we would do well to scan *Camel Xiangzi* for traces of older, pre-capitalist narrative paradigms as well, a feeling reinforced by Xiangzi's fixation on the object, which involves a very different psychic structure than the petty-bourgeois fixation on the abstract pleasures of saving itself. For the rickshaw is not some mere means to an end (security, an investment against the future): given the prospect of age and increasing physical debilitation, the logical (capitalist) precaution would be to evolve from the status of a possessor of an individual rickshaw to that of the head or manager of a rickshaw business—the novel explicitly dramatizes Xiangzi's utter lack of interest in this possibility. It goes on, furthermore, systematically to display the excess and the fascination of his desire for the object itself, whose very look and feel are evoked, in particular, its lacquer and bright color (including a whole dimension of archaic color symbolism, significantly dramatized in Xiangzi's hesitation before a vehicle whose color scheme conveys ill omen and bad fortune). It becomes apparent that the rickshaw functions most intensely as a virtual extension of Xiangzi's own body, an object with which he lives in virtual symbiosis, which heightens and increases his energies, and in tandem with which he feels most alive and approximates most nearly some ideal self. The ultimate loss of the rickshaw is therefore a psychic as well as a personal disaster, and spells the breakdown of Xiangzi's resolutions and discipline, the collapse of his will, the extinction of his life ambition, his disintegration into drink, pleasure, and parasitic begging and vagabondage.

That this is a peculiar and unique passion—at once archaic, in its suggestion of the intimacy of the artisan with his tools, and Utopian alike, in its foreshadowing of non-alienated labor—is then underscored by the incomprehension and exasperation of Xiangzi's wife, whose values and ideological concepts (she is the daughter of a small

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

businessman) are very specifically marked as those of emergent capitalism and the market: it is clear to her that Xiangzi's vocation is the prototype and the sign of class-marked work and dooms him to the condition of a menial or a servant. How Lao She himself evaluates Xiangzi's "absolute" is much less clear: I will show in a moment that the logic of the narrative largely positions the reader in Tigress' ideological standpoint rather than in the protagonist's.

But we must first note the specific narrative rhythms determined by Xiangzi's historically archaic passion. The precapitalist view of money as hoard or treasure (or of value as the possession of the unique, quasi-sacred object) generates an alternation which it would be well not too hastily to characterize as cyclic (although it will be clear shortly that it retains some features of the older agricultural and seasonal cycles). I would rather propose to see the dominant rhythm of the narrative as that which the Western tradition figures under the great emblem of the wheel of Fortune: a temporality organized around what the cyberneticians call an off-on or zero-sum logic. You win the object of desire, and then you lose everything and begin all over again. There is no middle ground in this situation which knows only the two great categories of success and failure, wealth (even relative) and poverty. This alternation governs the organization of what I will call the classical tale (from the *Arabian Nights* to Boccaccio and Marguerite de Navarre), a specific narrative form which is the organic cultural expression of the moment and the dynamics of precapitalist commerce: that is, a whole life world of merchants, caravans, fairs, and trade which flourished, as Marx showed, in the interstices of modes of production with very different economic dynamics, (within feudalism, in medieval Europe, or within the Asiatic mode of production). These closed forms (Goethe will belatedly theorize their essential content as the "unerhörte Begebenheit," the unexpected, undreamed of occurrence, never before seen on land or sea) will then project what I will call the ideology of Fortune (whose many variations include a more religious version in the ideology of Providence), a conception of time whose symbolic exercise can range from passionate gambling and divination to the fascination, in the older cities, with stories of extraordinary strokes of good luck (the merchant ship thought lost at sea, but finally returning with its precious cargo) or of equally unexpected disaster. This specific narrative ideology is then radically to be distinguished from the baleful Fate or Destiny of the culture of feudal aristocrats or samurai, oriented around death, or from what Ernest Bloch has shown to be their peasant analogues in the magical wishes and gratifications of the fairy tale.

Yet, as is to be expected, the form of the classical tale, linked to a specific type of economic activity, begins to slacken and to unravel in the world of nascent capitalism: its wheel-of-Fortune temporality persists in the great alternations of Balzac's frenzied plots, but dissolves altogether in the later naturalist paradigm for an unexpected reason. The classical tale demands the reader's commitment to a naive and positive notion of success, in the form of great good fortune. As society, however, becomes reorganized by the logic of capitalism and is increasingly dominated by commodification, something momentous happens to the very concept of success itself: people begin to feel that success in a commodified society is inauthentic. Novels which continue to arrest the wheel of Fortune at the moment of success (which will now be the moment of a bourgeois achievement of money and power), novels of which Maupassant's *Bel Ami* is perhaps the canonical example, are now felt to exercise only degraded or vulgar, inauthentic forms of wish-fulfillment: from such novels, virtually at once, the lineage of the contemporary commercial bestseller will spring. Under these circumstances only failure comes to seem authentic, and novels which have a certain vocation for truth (that is, henceforth, what is painful) tend rather to find their fulfillment, their rock-bottom ultimate reality, in the

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

contemplation of the moment of ultimate disaster, definitive misery, and psychic disintegration and demoralization. This is, of course, the inner logic of the naturalist novel or paradigm and the reason for its invention or emergence (a similar dynamic can be observed in the very different narrative system of the twentieth-century existential or "anti-hero" plot). *Camel Xiangzi*, in its original version, clearly reaches this point in its closing chapters. But Lao She's situation is far more complex and overcharged, in its coexistence of several distinct modes of production and their cultural expressions, than that of the European or American naturalist novelists; and this is why it is not inconsistent to argue that what dominates his first novel's rhythm is not this later form, but rather the older pattern of the wheel of Fortune itself.

I find confirmation of this view in another dimension of the text, which is, of course, also a city novel, one of the great evocations of Beijing in the 1930s: here the alternating rhythm of success and failure described above will be expressed in a supplementary way through the alternation of the seasons. This city is indeed famous for its extremes of heat and cold: sweltering summers and glacial winters. Around these two poles, then, the off-on movement in question now begins to reorganize itself, investing its essential logic in the great scenes of the residential tenement courtyard in oppressive heat, or the tribulations of Xiangzi and his fellow runners under snow and implacable cold. When other seasons begin to appear, as most notable in the extraordinary blossoming of spring in the last chapter of the original version, the festive moment of the approach to summer and the ceremonial excursions to the shrines and holiday places of the Western Hills (which significantly include a ritual execution), this new moment is no longer read against the earlier rhythm, but rather, in naturalist fashion, against Xiangzi's final abjection and disintegration.

There is, however, another perspective from which to grasp what we have been calling the outer form of this novel, since the specific rhythms of the latter project an equally characteristic type of readerly expectation and reaction—one that includes, if not what is generally called "omniscience," then at any rate a certain "additional knowledge" which partially sets our position off from the protagonist. For it is certain that we coincide with him to the degree that we must desire what he desires; yet the convention of the wheel-of-Fortune narrative always reminds us that any punctual success (or failure) is inscribed in a larger lawful curve or alternation—whatever rises must fall, whatever falls may well momentarily rise again; and this knowledge (or "wisdom") is a luxury the character himself cannot afford in his passionate struggle, without thereby at once becoming either a cynic or a sage (and losing his passion). Readerly emotion here is thus governed by what in the case of Balzac I've called "hope against hope": a situation in which we are divided, in which we feel for and with the protagonist, all the while knowing that some ultimate failure is inevitable, and that, as Pascal says, whatever the earlier acts of the comedy, the end is always a matter of death.

It is in this space of a conventional "omniscience," a space formally constitutive of the classical tale, that a rather different dynamic begins to develop, which we will call the inner form of the narrative. This is not exactly a space of some new subjectivity, of the type which will later be signalled by the presence of the newer techniques of inner monologue and stream-of-consciousness. Indeed, I hesitate to characterize it as the "Western" element operating within an otherwise classical pre-Western kind of storytelling; although the tension and disjunction between these two levels of the novel at once confers on the text the status of that institutionalized Western thing, the "novel" as a genre.

Inner form, in *Camel Xiangzi*, is the space of a new kind of play of ideological

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

judgement, a distance from the subjective experience of the protagonist which solicits an active evaluation of his consciousness. This is something we can already observe at work in the very content of the "hope against hope" rhythm described above: for while the outer form positions us on Xiangzi's side in the conflict between his passion, his libidinal absolute, and his wife's petty bourgeois calculation, the alternating rhythm of our expectations brings us rather to see his decisions from her perspective, and to murmur, at this or that key moment: Don't do that, you'll be sorry! Go into the business, be reasonable, think about the future! Your only chance is to get yourself installed in your father-in-law's business! We have thus been maneuvered, against our own will, into a situation in which we must affirm the petty bourgeois wisdom on this, the wisdom of capital and the market. It is an effect with which Brecht played far more consciously when in his great "Chinese" play, *The Good Person of Szechuan*, he forces the spectator into a similar opposition to Shen Te's kindness, and causes us to applaud the emergence of the bad cousin, who embodies the implacable ruthlessness necessary to survive in a competitive business situation. Yet in Brecht this extraordinary ideological reversal is an "estrangement effect," that is, a way of trapping the spectator in his/her own contradictions in such a way that some new politicizing and energizing self-knowledge emerges, along with some new awareness of the logic of the system (and the inadequacy of purely moral categories).

In Lao She, the paradoxes of such inner ideological judgement are masked, and must be said to remain at the level of ideological contradiction: something which is hardly clarified when to this set of ideological oppositions (my own happiness against the delayed gratification of small business wisdom) is added another, authorial set. Here now are Lao She's own judgements on the nature of Xiangzi's values (the text is from the first version of 1936)*:

> His life might well be ruined by his own hands but he wasn't about to sacrifice anything for anybody. He who works for himself knows how to destroy himself. These are the two starting points of Individualism. (237)

The new judgement is then lyrically amplified in the bitter and tragic peroration with which, in the final paragraph of the novel, Lao She dismisses this now miserable figure into anonymity:

> Handsome, ambitious, dreamer of fine dreams, selfish, individualistic, sturdy, great Hsiang Tzu. No one knows how many funerals he marched in, and no one knows when or where he was able to get himself buried, that degerate, selfish, unlucky offspring of society's diseased womb, a ghost caught in Individualism's blind alley. (249)

Even if we choose to see this very belated motif of Individualism as a last-minute authorial scramble to bring some larger social meaning into his narrative, it would still designate the presence in the novel of a deeper ideological contradiction. Even the concept of "Individualism," however, cannot be properly grasped unless it is juxtaposed with Lao She's equally vehement denunciation of a certain collectivism (in *Cat Country*). In my opinion, therefore, there was a certain plausibility to the otherwise crude left assessment of Lao She's work during the Cultural Revolution: for one thing, there is clearly no place in the narrative system of this novel for any third position, which might be that of collective

* *Rickshaw*, tr. Jean James (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1979).

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

solidarity; and one cannot feel, therefore, that the alterations in the later PRC rewrite of the text are successful.*

But it by no means follows that the work cannot be considered to have genuine political resonance of a progressive kind. What Lao She's own ideological opposition (the two evils of Individualism *and* Collectivism) obscures is that the two positions within the novel—Xiangzi and his wife Tigress—are *both* individualistic in this sense; except that the competitive individualism of petty bourgeois savings, accumulating capital for a small business which would at least secure your own future, represents a rather different type of individualism than Xiangzi's own passion which is invested in a vision of genuine personal fulfillment—the desired object, the rickshaw, and the joyful transfiguration of the body. However one wants to redefine or refocus the terms (security versus happiness?), it is clear that we are here in the presence of an ideological double-bind, an ideological binary opposition which cannot be resolved in its own terms, but only by transcending both of its terms towards some new one (which might then properly be that of collective praxis). Yet to dramatize just such binary ideological closures in capitalism is itself a political act, as Brecht's more self-conscious version testifies.

Yet even this conception of the novel as immanent ideological critique does not exhaust its political resonance. One of the great themes of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Marcuse) was indeed the proposition that in a fallen, alienated society the very demand for happiness itself—Stendhal's "promesse du bonheur"—is itself the ultimate and profoundly revolutionary gesture, since it raises those absolute expectations which can never be satisfied by the system itself. And this is clearly what Xiangzi's passion does, marking the structural limits of a world in which it is clearly unrealizable: Xiangzi's "demand" is absolute and Utopian and it is irreducible to that selfish individualism denounced at the end of the novel (unless indeed we take that very passage as a tragic, more properly Brechtian irony).

This positioning of a specifically Chinese "realistic" moment (which, as we have seen, includes within itself, cancelled and surcharged, the even older moment of the classical tale) seems to me essential if we are to grasp the full historical originality of the two writers to which the present issue is devoted, and who each clearly, in their distinct social and cultural contexts, mark significant formal breakthroughs. Three extensive critical essays give us an informed sense of these new texts and what it feels like to read them, a sense which must remain tantalizing for the Western reader, who cannot make direct contact with the two obviously important novels of Wang Wen-hsing (the stories of Wang Meng are, fortunately, available in English†). And in the spirit of contemporary theory, for which the "text" is slowly transformed into the various possible readings of the text, they also generously reconstruct the critical debates around these works, both in Taiwan and in the PRC, so that their historic significance is not merely deduced from formal innovation but also demonstrated by way of their energizing but also scandalizing impact on their contemporaries.

Meanwhile, it is significant and appropriate that with these two very different breakthroughs into literary modernity, the center of gravity of the discussion should shift to language itself and to the stylistic "techniques" of narrative: William Tay offers an authoritative review of these structures, which are also central to Sung-sheng Chang's argument (Edward Gunn is, I think, concerned rather to transcend the formalist limits of

* *Camel Xiangzi*, tr. Shi Xiaoqing (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981).

† *The Butterfly and Other Stories* (Beijing: Panda Books, 1983).

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

a purely linguistic discussion and, properly, to make links between it and the innovative social content of Wang Wen-hsing's novels).

I find, however, that one of the most striking features of this collective discussion (which is also a juxtaposition of and a potential differentiation between these two important writers) is obscured by the absence of a periodizing hypothesis I have found increasingly useful in situating contemporary works, and that is the notion that beyond the modernist break with more traditional or realistic forms and narrative styles, one can detect the emergence of something new and distinct, which often still looks like a now traditional modernist "experimentation," but whose dynamics are quite distinct in character from those of the older movement. This new cultural logic will henceforth, for better or for worse, be called postmodernism. To introduce it here is not, however, to impose some extraneous, purely Western theme or fashion: each of the three essays, indeed, turns critically on a modernist/postmodernist distinction which is never named as such.

But before arriving at the way in which this distinction can clarify the matter of stylistic innovation and "technique," we must retrace our steps and continue the story of "plot" as we began to raise it on the occasion of Lao She's novel. What is very striking indeed is the persistence of the ancient wheel-of-Fortune paradigm in these contemporary works. According to both commentators, a fortune-telling episode plays a crucial role in Wang Wen-hsing's *The Man with His Back to the Sea*; "fortunately" for our purposes, the same thematics can be found in his short story, "Line of Fate." I will not reduplicate Gunn's excellent discussion of this story, but rather try to displace it somewhat, by rewriting his analysis (staged in terms of the breakdown of community and older shared moral values) as a demonstration of the crisis of an older narrative paradigm. Two possible narratives are in effect opposed here: the older one of fate, of premonitory sign and inevitable fulfillment (the line on the hand really does measure future life), and the contemporary one of sheer contingency (the crease is arbitrary and meaningless, as the protagonist's parents reassure him). But in that case, the wilful and violent slashing of the hand becomes a strangely ambiguous gesture: does it only mean the obvious, that the child has attempted to prolong his life expectancy under his own power? Or may it not also—at the same time—signify a repudiation of the older magical sign (and narrative of fate), an attempt to destroy it as a sign system which also seeks somehow to avoid the other alternative (of a narrative which is reduced to sheer chance, to the meaningless or "schizophrenic" succession of unrelated events)? Wang Wen-hsing's second novel suggests that the attempt at imaginary resolution was unsuccessful, and that the novelist ultimately had to embrace this second alternative fully and without further regard for the narrative consequences.

Yet the very possibility of thematizing the narrative problem in this way, designating it reflexively by means of the fortune-telling motif, perhaps testifies to the extinction of the older form. In Lao She's novel, as we have seen, the cyclical-destiny narrative was still alive, albeit living an underground existence and perpetually worked over in a process of slow dissolution by the realistic aesthetic: but realism needed to keep the older closed narratives alive, if only because its own historic vitality consisted in their perpetual undermining. Realism can be seen, therefore, as a process of *decoding*, of desacralizing and deconstructing, the older inherited, surcharged paradigms: its vocation disappears when its object of dissolution has ceased to exist, and this is, in Western literary history, the moment of a remarkable transformation and the emergence of what we call modernism.

Family Transformation and Wang Meng's stories seem in their very different ways to mark an earlier stage in this process: the Oedipal plot on the one hand, and the older

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

romantic Cultural-revolutionary sense of history as narrative, both functioning respectively to replace the more archaic destiny motif, but still offering something like a preexistent narrative raw material, a set of preexisting "master" narrative paradigms, which are in both writers dissolved, but not for all that (yet) replaced by the radical discontinuity of the poststructuralist paradigm. Both seem to offer relative restabilizations: Sung-sheng Chang demonstrates the gradual reestablishment, in the later chapters of *Family Transformation*, of a kind of third-person narrative authority whose ironies would be most consistent with the modernist tradition. Meanwhile, William Tay's useful distinction between "plot-centered" and "character-centered" narratives suggests that the reunifying category of the character—the monad, the coherence of the psychological subject—is in Wang Meng retained as a kind of frame also familiar to us in the Western modernisms.

We can now therefore propose a series of distinct narrative possibilities, which emerge discontinuously at various historical moments along the trajectory of social and economic modernization. We have insisted first of all at some length on the traditional or classical tale, the closed narrative projected from the image of the wheel of Fortune; realism would appear, then, as a critical narrative process whose "truth" is less to be found in some mimetic representation of secular reality than in its protean function of demystifying and dismantling the older sacred or superstitious codes which obscure the naked economic rock bottom of that new secular world (*Don Quixote* thereby remains the inaugural and paradigmatic gesture of realism as such). The modernisms are clearly the most complex matrix of distinct narrative forms and the most difficult to resume in any single succinct formula. They would all, however, seem to share some sense (or experience) of the bracketting of the older realistic "referent," and to explore former constituent parts of "experience" which have now come to be felt as "semi-autonomous," as having some relatively independent or separated existence in their own right: most notably language and the symbolic, and the psyche or subjectivity, including the great modernist theme of temporality. Postmodernism might then (too hastily) be seen as the break-up of even those hitherto coherent realms, and the fall into a kind of schizophrenic flux in which the "referent" has ceased to exist, but in which Language and the psyche (or centered subject) have also been exploded, their broken pieces falling back into a random and aleatory space sometimes known as "textualization."

We may now, from this perspective, return to the questions of literary style and technique so ably and variously raised in these essays. As several of these critics point out, such discussions present the danger of "reifying" their object: the very conception of a literary "technique" tends to project the illusion of some instrumental or technological neutrality, as well as to close off the necessary but dialectical shift from a micro- or linguistic discussion to other levels of plot and social content. But if "point of view" criticism and the like is today a relatively sterile affair in the West, this is because the heroic age of the production of such new techniques has here long since ended (such discussions were very vital indeed in the early Jamesian and post-Jamesian decades of the century). Such is clearly not the case in the Chinese tradition, whose situation is however complicated by another feature to which Sung-sheng Chang has drawn our attention: namely that alongside the reality of "technique" as the expression of new kinds of phenomenological experience, "technique" also has the (not necessarily related) value of a *sign*: stream-of-consciousness, for example, "still signifies 'progress' in the writing profession to Chinese writers who turn to this Western model." Technique-as-sign thus marks a text, in a relatively external way, both as "modern" or "innovative" and also as

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

"Western," something which clearly makes for problems in literary debates in the PRC, as Tay abundantly documents.

This said, there are many indications in the present studies that what is here generally evoked as standard "modernist" techniques (stream-of-consciousness, inner monologue, etc., etc.) are in fact often not exactly that, and may rather constitute the emergence of something it would be more accurate to call postmodern (even if one ignores the revealing references to contemporary theorists such as Culler and Foucault). Sung-sheng Chang seems to me to designate a significant distinction indeed when she discusses a fundamental shift in the Western critical reception and understanding of its own modernist "technique" of stream-of-consciousness. For an older modernist criticism, the stream-of-consciousness techniques of a Joyce were still understood as the mimesis of psychological reality, a view which presupposed the conviction that consciousness or psychological experience were still somehow at one with language itself. It then becomes a significant matter when newer critics set about problematizing that very identity, and disjoining the experience of language from the experience of the psyche, so that the technique is now seen less as a matter of *reproducing* that experience than of *verbalizing* it, to use their terminology (Gunn puts it this way: "the deliberate thrusting of technique into the front of the reader's awareness shakes the assumption of its authenticity"). And although the traditional critics do not make the distinction, and leaving aside the whole question of how Joyce himself is to be read, it would seem that we touch here on the very moment of the transition into postmodernism, in a moment in which verbal patterns can no longer be felt to entertain any necessary or expressive relationship to their putative psychological meanings (this is the moment of the postmodernist separation of Signifier from Signified, as opposed to the older modernist moment of the separation of the still integral Sign from its older Referent).

But William Tay also touches on this moment of a radical break between modernism and postmodernism, in his very different context, when he mounts an elaborate, subtle, yet decisive distinction between stream-of-consciousness and inner monologue: a strategic distinction which will be of the greatest importance when we come in a moment to the problem of evaluating Wang Meng's fiction.

As for Wang Wen-hsing, it would now seem abundantly clear that his latest novel must, in content as well as in style, be considered postmodernist. And this is incidentally why Gunn's discussion of Wang's "existentialism" strikes me as both interesting and problematic. The trajectory of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the West included as one decisive symbolic episode the radical break with the older existentialisms (most notably those of Sartre and Camus, but also traditional readings of Heidegger), which were considered as the final form of Western metaphysics (the proposition that life is meaningless or absurd still constituting a last desperate negative "definition" of the "meaning of life"—the great false unanswerable "metaphysical" question). That Wang Wen-hsing's mature work should have emerged from an essentially existential thematics would seem historically most logical indeed; but I find myself wondering whether a different reading of *The Man with His Back to the Sea* might not be possible, namely one which sees it not as an exercise in existential thinking, but rather an intricate deconstruction of precisely that older existential ideology which informed the writer's earlier works.

For it would be an error to suppose that "postmodernism" is still in any way exclusively Western in the way that modernism was. A new culture which articulates the logic of a new global and multinational late capitalism can no longer be considered a purely Western export but may be expected to characterize at least certain other local zones of

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

reality around the capitalist world: the extraordinary recent economic development of Taiwan, as well as of other areas of the Far East, suggests as much, and would perhaps encourage us to see Wang Wen-hsing henceforth neither as a Chinese modernist, nor an importer of Western innovations, but rather as a new and vital source of the production of a henceforth global postmodernist culture.

The logic of our argument, therefore, would seem to lead us to the conclusion that if "stream-of-consciousness," as it is described here, is in reality postmodernist, Wang Meng's deployment of the "inner monologue" would then mark as "modernist" a work whose themes—most notably the critique of bureaucracy as it is integral to the process of socialist construction—might more traditionally have ranged it under the category of what Lukacs called "critical realism." But when we turn to the socialist countries, we are dealing with a much more recent and chronologically limited tradition from which new and original categories may ultimately be expected to emerge, and in which inherited Western categories risk being rather misleading.

That there is much justification for considering Wang Meng's innovations as somehow "modernist" I have no doubt: these have been carefully anatomized here by William Tay under their constituent forms of "interior monologue, narrated monologue, and space/time montage" (which, as indicated above, he seeks radically to differentiate from a "stream-of-consciousness," with its foundation in the very different psychological conception of free association). I feel that in order to grasp the historical significance of these technical innovations, it would be appropriate to grasp their production as it emerges from the requirements and the necessities of a historically new type of content. When we look more closely at the range of Wang Meng's work, it becomes clear that only the first of his stories, "The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department" (which aroused much debate and controversy when it appeared in 1956), can be considered to be critical realism in the generic sense of the analysis of bureaucratic and organizational excess and ossification (I suspect, meanwhile, that much of the exile literature from after the period of the Cultural Revolution, such as the stories of Chen Jo-hsi, remain in this particular category).

What intervenes between this first story and those of Wang Meng's maturity, written after the Cultural Revolution, is of course this last itself, but not so much as a series of events: rather, as the impact of History itself, now grasped as an extraordinary, massive, bewildering, often catastrophic and inexplicable collective experience. The earlier anti-bureaucratic thematics do not of course disappear; but it is as though the newer works found themselves endowed with a new supplementary vocation, that of the expression of a unique new sense of History, which is added on to the earlier critical and didactic impulse and lends the newer works a formal complexity the earlier tale did not possess. The techniques enumerated above find their deeper formal necessity in the demands of this new experience of temporality: the discovery of a new present in the stability which followed the eleven years, but a present which now suddenly bears with it a past—the past of spatial displacement, exile and separation, of personal hardship, patience and suffering, a sudden discovery of memory as loss and as bitter enigma. Such reinvention of lived memory is always a new thing, a *Novum*, what Gadamer would call a "historically effective" (*wirkungsgeschichtlich*) event. In spite of the banal abstractions through which we have just evoked it, therefore, which would seem to assimilate it to a whole range of traditional literary expressions of loss in time from Homer and classical Chinese literature all the way to Proust and Rilke, it retains the freshness and desolation of a radically new present—one whose more immediate specificity lies in the collective and historical way in which the shared experience is articulated.

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Yet the names of Proust, Rilke, and a whole range of other writers of the Western modernist tradition suggest that if we set aside the subjectivism, the isolation and individuality, the introspective psychologism of Western experience for a moment, there are striking analogies between this particular impulse in Western high modernism and the recent work of Wang Meng. These are structural and purely formal analogies, which underscore the articulation, in both kinds of texts, between a certain type of temporal experience and a certain kind of technical innovation, about which it must also be specified that the modernist experience of deep perspectival time and rememoration is radically and structurally distinct from the postmodernist experience of a fragmented or "schizophrenic" time, a time of the perpetual present and of the past as sheer image or simulacrum. With these reservations, it seems perfectly appropriate to consider that Wang Meng's work is "modernist" in its structure. But it should also be evident that modernist "techniques" in this sense need carry no suggestion of some foreign export product which is borrowed or imported into a different socio-economic context. (Even if that were the case, however, contemporary anthropology has offered striking cases of the ways in which a borrowed cultural form can be reappropriated and utterly re-functioned by a different social formation.)

Indeed, the PRC critical debates reported by William Tay explicity raise the question of the possibility of a "Marxist modernism" (something they all by no means reject). But we have seen that its emergence by no means presupposes the same conditions of possibility as in the West, but rather distinct ones, rooted in the specific situation of socialist construction (and also including other determinants we have not mentioned here, as in Xu Chi's interesting correlation of cultural modernism with the Four Modernizations). It would follow also that the destiny of high modernism in the West (with its mutation into postmodernism) does not at all need to be paradigmatic for the evolution of a socialist analogue. Indeed, when a socialist culture has evolved to the point where it has its own long historical tradition and where its formal originality has become visible and distinct, it may well be that new categories and new names will become necessary for phenomena we are for the moment condemned to discuss in borrowed language.

This content downloaded from 91.229.229.13 on Wed, 25 Jun 2014 08:28:16 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions